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Werner Sombart and National Socialism

WORKING PAPER No. 19

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Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that Werner Sombart serves as an example of an exponent of the German Historical School of Economic Thought who joined the National Socialists. This thesis is explored in three sections. The first examines the historical context in which Sombart was reared, considering aspects of his family life, economic class, education, and early academic career. In addition, this section explores Sombart’s relations to the Historical School and his mentor Gustav Schmoller, as well as Sombart’s relation to Marxism and socialism. The second section of this inquiry seeks to trace the changes in Sombart’s ideology that eventually led to his supporting and joining in with Germany’s National Socialists. Lastly, the significance of Sombart’s work is considered for its contribution to the study of sociology, especially his advancing a critical analysis of the capitalist system, and its importance for understanding the National Socialist ideology. In conclusion, the life and work of Werner Sombart is reflected upon for its relevance to contemporary society.

***Journal of Economic Literature* Classification Codes:**

B150, B310, P110

Key Words: German Historical School, *Kathedersozialisten*, National Socialism, Society, Werner Sombart

This inquiry seeks to establish that Werner Sombart serves as an example of an exponent of the Historical School of Economics who joined the National Socialists. While it is common for social scientists to be acquainted with names like Max Weber or Gustav Schmoller, the name Werner Sombart remains ubiquitously unknown, certainly outside of the German-speaking world. His major role in the creation of the field of sociology alongside Weber goes uncredited. His term “late-capitalism” is widely used by critical thinkers in contemporary societies, yet few are familiar with his work. Werner Sombart lived through one of the most awful periods of all of human history. As a young man he was a Marxist. As he grew older, alongside the newly unified Germany, Sombart became a supporter of National Socialism. Some say that he was only going along with it to save himself from persecution. Others believe Sombart was truly anti-Semitic. It is rumored that in 1934 Sombart was one of many prominent academics who signed a statement of support for Adolf Hitler, titled, *Deutsche Wissenschaftler hinter Adolf Hitler*. Whether or not Sombart was indeed a true supporter of the Nazi program his analysis of the nature of the capitalist system, his attempts to reform it, and important texts such as “Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?” [1905] remain relevant to this day.

Sombart as an Exponent of the Historical School

In their introduction to the English translation of *Economic Life in the Modern Age* [2001], Reiner Grundmann and Nico Stehr consider the life and career of Werner Sombart. On January 19, 1863 in Ermsleben, Prussia – a community of about 3,000 people – Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xiii) write that Sombart was born into a family identified as upper-middle class, or “liberal bourgeois.” The authors attribute this in large part to his father’s work ethic, charisma, and intellect.

Werner’s father, Anton Ludwig Sombart, was not only a successful businessman in the sugar industry, but also served as mayor of their town of Ermsleben. Sombart the elder was, in his lifetime, both a member of the Prussian and German Reichstag, as well as the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*. The family relocated to Berlin when the younger Sombart was twelve-years-old. There, he would remain for most of his life. Werner Sombart died in 1941.

In his intellectual biography of Sombart – written just one year after his death – Abram L. Harris compares the life of Sombart to the life of the German nation. Published in *The Journal of Political Economy* under the title, “Sombart and German (National) Socialism,” Harris (1942, 805-806) explains that Sombart was just eight-years-old when the Franco-Prussian war ended with the unification of Germany, and by the time Sombart was beginning his academic career, the teachings of Karl Marx were highly influential to members of both the working

and ruling classes. According to Harris (1942, 805-806), as a young man, Sombart witnessed the dilution of revolutionary Marxism into the social reforms put forth by the *Kathedersozialisten* and members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*. He was 51-years-old when the First World War began and was witness to the defeat of Germany, followed shortly thereafter by the failure of the Weimar Republic. Harris (1942, 806) concludes, Sombart's life began "at the dawn of German capitalism; it ended at the high-noon of German fascism."

Sombart's academic career began with Gustav Schmoller, under whom he wrote his doctoral thesis. This thesis, which was accepted in 1888 and completed in Berlin, was "brilliant" in the opinion advanced by Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xiii). Sombart's thesis on the Roman *Campagna* – or "countryside" – has, like much of Sombart's work, not yet been made available to readers of English. The significance of the motif of the landscape of Rome for Sombart's dissertation shall be discussed in the third section of this inquiry. Two years after obtaining his doctoral degree, Sombart was appointed in Breslau as Associate Professor by recommendation of his mentor Schmoller, write Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xiii). He was later elected to city council. In 1904, Sombart became an editor of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, and in 1906 Sombart began lecturing at the *Handelshochschule* in Berlin.

Harris (1992, 42), notes that it was not until 1917 that Sombart was finally given a chair in the Economics Department at the University of Berlin. By then, Sombart had already garnered much attention for his early writings on the development of capitalism. Sombart became a well-known lecturer, delivering his thoughts to large audiences in Berlin and abroad. Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xiv) write that there seems to have been a popular sentiment running throughout Germany at the time that Sombart was able to tap into, emphasizing that he was known to attract audiences that numbered in the thousands. According to his critics, Sombart was known to change his mind often as he sought public approval and was thus vulnerable to the popular culture. Despite his popularity, Sombart had a difficult time advancing his professorship, which Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xiii) attribute mostly to his blatant affiliation with socialism – and the administration’s attitude toward this affiliation – without disregarding his notorious attention-seeking behavior.

Sombart absorbed the lessons of the Historical School of Economic Thought while studying under Schmoller, who was its most influential figurehead. This tradition rejected the theoretical assumptions put forth by economists who relied on deductive reasoning to explain economic behavior. The Historical School advocated placing emphasis on the historical context from which economic behavior is observed. It was Schmoller who started the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*,

which accepted that capitalism was an irreversible part of an historical process, but sought to make peoples' lives better through social reform. The members of the *Verein* came to be known as *Kathedersozialisten*, or “socialists of the lectern,” in reference to their status as university professors. In Abraham Ascher's (1963) “Professors as Propagandists: The Politics of the Kathedersozialisten,” published in the *Journal of European Affairs*, the conviction of Sombart's teacher is considered. Ascher (1963, 287) writes that Schmoller believed class antagonisms were at such a height in Germany, that if the government did not step in to take drastic measures in order to reform society, they would undoubtedly be faced with revolution. The *Kathedersozialisten*, including Sombart, sought to quell the antagonisms of industrial German society in order to avoid serious social upheaval.

To this effect, Sombart was also greatly indebted to the work of Karl Marx. In fact, Sombart freely admitted his intentions were to continue a critical analysis of capitalism that was initiated by Marx, note Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xv), who quote directly from the supplement to the third volume of *Capital*, published in 1895, in which Friedrich Engels commends Sombart on his early writings regarding capitalism, stating that, “It is the first time that a German university professor succeeds on the whole in seeing in Marx's writings what Marx really says.” By adding a socio-cultural dimension to Marx's analysis of capitalism, Sombart would come to place emphasis on what he called *Volksgeist*, or “the spirit

of society.” This concept of *Volksgeist* was pervasive throughout his work and would come to inform his eventual turn towards National Socialism.

Sombart’s Turn towards National Socialism

Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xv-xviii) observe that Sombart’s intellectual turn can be traced by examining the many versions of his book, *Sozialismus und Soziale Bewegung*. The first nine editions of this book were supportive and sympathetic to the socialist movement, while in the tenth version – which was published in 1924 – Sombart began to criticize Marx and socialism more generally. The final edition was published under the title *Deutscher Sozialismus* [1934]. An English translation was published three years later under a different title: *A New Social Philosophy*. Throughout this book, Sombart shows enthusiastic support for National Socialism and fervent criticism for the Marxist critique. In the foreword to the final edition of his evolving series, Sombart (1937, xii) devotes his work to the *Geist* with which he claims all Germans think and act, expressed in the phrase: “All for our country.”

Similar to the claim made by Harris in “Sombart and German (National) Socialism” Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xvi) attest that Sombart’s transition from exponent of the Historical School, supporter of socialism, and successor of Marx, to supporter of National Socialism can be characterized by his relationship with Germany. Sombart – once a fervent supporter of social reforms in order to make

Germany great – became disenchanted with the project of socialism and with Germany itself around the year 1902. This sentiment is detailed in Sombart's *Das Proletariat* [1906] which described his disappointment with the working class to form as a cohesive force for social change. Grundmann and Stehr quote Sombart at length raving about the disconnectedness of the proletarian from the soil, their taste for abstraction, and their preference for rationality over instinct. This, in Sombart's point of view, was akin to a "spiritual death of the working class" and a loss of hope for any sort of *Volksgemeinschaft*, or "people's community." Sombart concluded that the *Geist* of the German people must itself have been capitalistic, and thus incapable of change.

Harris (1942, 806) refrains from using Sombart's term, *Geist*, but suggests that his historical tendencies were heavily influenced by a distinctively German view or philosophical tendency. Consistent with his reputation for following trends, Sombart's disenfranchisement with the German nation state was short-lived, and in 1910 Sombart became a fervent nationalist, and turned his attention towards making Germany great again. Freshly equipped with a fierce anti-Semitic posture, Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xvii) credit this change in Sombart's attitude to his "strategy of reconciliation," through which, Sombart distinguishes between two types of capitalists: "entrepreneurs" and "traders." The entrepreneurs, whom he would later refer to as "heroes," are afforded respect, while those who Sombart

deems traders are blamed for the ills of society. In his early work, Sombart had praised the Jewish peoples for what he thought was their major historic role in the formation of capitalism. Now he chose to vilify them by employing his concept of *Volksgeist* and conflating the definitions of ethnicity and culture, resulting in his stereotyping of Jewish people as traders. Harris (1942, 813) summarizes Sombart's use of *Volksgeist* to mean those "spiritual qualities" belonging to any group of people, but that can only be recognized by "the intuition of certain German philosophers." For this reason, and from this point on, Sombart claims that the Jewish spirit is the exact opposite of the German *Volksgeist*.

In "The Aim and Way of German Socialism" from *A New Social Philosophy*, Sombart (1937, 146) declares that the National Socialist movement is "far more radical" than proletarian socialism. In what Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xvii) declare "his most Nazified book," Sombart continues, claiming that proletarian socialism is simply an "inverted" form of capitalism, while National Socialism is actually anti-capitalistic. National Socialism is not only concerned with economics, writes Sombart, but it embraces every part of German life and culture – it is "totalistic." These statements echo almost verbatim the propaganda of the Nazi Party that is collected in George L. Mosse's *Nazi Culture* [1966], though Sombart continues to be difficult to pin down. Even in his most "Nazified" text in which he fervently rejects Marxism, Grundmann and Stehr (2017, xvii) note that Sombart

continues to refer to Marx as intellectual authority, writing that the Nazis “must have been bewildered” by him. Harris (1942, 815) asserts, “...it is clear from his own words that he looked upon the party as the means of realizing the principles he espoused. This, of course, is not to say that he supported or even approved the violent and inhumane practices of the party leaders and their associates.”

The Significance of Sombart’s Work

It has been suggested that Sombart was engaging in a “Faustian Pact” when he offered his support to the Nazi cause. Colin Loader’s (2001, 71) article published in *Society* titled “Werner Sombart’s *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*,” suggests that historians as well as others who shine a light on the relatedness of Sombart’s work with the Nazi ideology are simply reading “too much of the present back into the past.” Loader (2001, 71) considers the perceived anti-Semitism of Sombart’s *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, first published in 1911, as the force behind Sombart’s lack of notoriety today despite his enormous part in the creation of the field of sociology. Seeking to further inspect what he deems as Sombart’s most notorious text, Loader (2001, 72-77) examines Sombart’s work in the context of four areas of inquiry: “the origins of German sociology,” “the development of Sombart’s views about the Jews,” “the reception of his ideas by Jews at the time,”

and “the narrative of anti-Semitism,” postulating that without the rise of National Socialism, Sombart’s name might not have been tarnished by anti-Semitism.

It has been put forth that Sombart was an advocate for the notion of *Volksgeist* – particularly, that of the German society in which National Socialism took hold. This preoccupation with spirit, along with his critique of modernism, and his recognition of the major role that Jewish peoples had in shaping world history, coincide with the philosophical basis for the National Socialism which is described throughout Mosse’s annotated collection of Nazi texts. Mosse describes the Nazi ideology as founded on nostalgia for a mythical legacy of greatness that supposedly connected the German *Volk* to ancient Rome. This Aryan “superiority” is counter-posed in the National Socialist ideology to a so-called “degeneration of culture” that was perpetrated by the Jews. As Mosse asserts poignantly throughout his book, anti-Semitism was not just one part of the Nazi ideology – it pervaded all aspects of it.

Some attribute the rise of fascism in Germany to a specifically German way of thinking about the world. This argument is named by Harris (1942, 816) as an “antilibertarian pattern of thought.” While there is some historical support behind it – it is commonly noted that there was “something in the air” in Germany during Sombart’s lifetime, namely, a popular distrust of liberal democracy to deliver social values. Harris (1942, 816) takes this argument a step further, claiming that

there were nationalistic and authoritarian characteristics to the German people themselves. Yet, this argument does not fully account for the circumstantial economic relations that played into the hands of the Nazi movement, nor does it explain the rise of fascism in a general sense – as fascism is not unique to German National Socialism. Furthermore, this argument serves to generalize an entire group of people – mimicking Sombart’s spiritual analysis of capitalism as well as the Nazi ideology it seeks to understand.

Steven N. Fuller’s intellectual biography of Adolf Bartels, *The Nazi’s Literary Grandfather* (1996), investigates the historical conditions of National Socialism. Fuller (1996, 37) emphasizes the influence that the *Kathedersozialisten* had on public opinion and social policy in the period before the First World War, suggesting that the social reforming advanced by the *Kathedersozialisten* may well have paved the way for the National Socialists to take hold of Germany in the period between the two World Wars. Ascher’s (1963, 291) text supports this sentiment, maintaining that the socialism advanced by Schmoller and other members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* was imperialistic. In further support of Fuller’s statement, one could argue that the inherent, systemic limitations imposed on attempts to mitigate the negative societal effects of capitalism through projects of reform which at all costs sought to avoid revolutionary politics could have

contributed to a common demoralization in a German society left searching for a scapegoat.

Perhaps Loader's (2001, 71) thesis with regards to the Jewish question in Sombart's work bears validity. There may be a tendency when looking back on history to "read too much of the present back into the past." Yet, Loader's argument – that both the meaning and reception of Sombart's work on the Jews remain contradictory – does not put it at odds with Nazi ideology. One can appreciate Loader's (2001, 77) cautioning about the simplification of a body of work to fit a "seamless narrative." The intellectual meanderings of Sombart certainly cannot be defined by any one ideology. Nevertheless, what Loader (2001, 77) concludes at the end of his inquiry – that Sombart's work on the Jews "was not proto-Nazi" – is unconvincing in the light of a deeper analysis of the Nazi ideology. Loader's thesis shifts the focus from Sombart's work to his character – but attempting to redeem or vilify Sombart's character in order to justify studying his work is erroneous. Whether or not it can be proven when, or to what degree Sombart was won to the trajectory of the Nazis, the significance of Sombart's work is that it in fact allows one to better understand the basis and worldview of the Nazi Party; and in doing so, one is able to better understand the nature of the rise of National Socialism in Germany.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Werner Sombart serves as an example of an exponent of the Historical School of Economics who joined the National Socialists. It could be said that Sombart was born in the wrong place at the wrong time; his life spanned the gap between the sinking in of Karl Marx's revolutionary critique of capitalism throughout Europe and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. Sombart was well aware of the ills of the capitalist system, and spent his early career promoting policies aimed at mitigating the threat of civil unrest caused by the failures of liberal democracy. As he aged, the newly unified Germany aged along with him, and they both fell into the depths of a fascist ideology. Werner Sombart was of the youngest Historical School and may well have been the last major component of this tradition in economics. Did Sombart commit a Faustian Pact in order to garner fame and attention in his early career, only to be largely forgotten in the wake of a genocide that claimed 6 million lives? Many of his published works have yet to be translated to English. As the threat of fascism peaks again around the globe, an investigation into the life and work of Werner Sombart can provide a deeper understanding of the historical example of fascism in Germany.

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